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Carl Swanigan Interview - Transcript

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**Interview with
CARL SWANIGAN
8 May 2003**

[I went to Carl's home 19459 Monte Vista in Detroit where he was monitoring his mother-in-law beside a hospital bed in the living room and a granddaughter in the family room who had time off from school that day. Edith, his wife was looking after another relative and was not at home. We talked mostly about his great-grandfather who made a great impact on the family. My first tape was defective. Carl had articles about his great-grandfather and promised to photocopy these for me. My guess is that most of the material we covered in the first tape can be found in the coming documents. We did not cover much of the latter portion of his career in the church. I want to ask him a few hard questions but not in the context we were. Perhaps at a latter time. What I did get on the second tape is as follows.]

B: First of all, what was your great-grandfather's full name.

S: His full name was George Ricks. Because he was a preacher in his day, which was just after the days of slavery, he was known as "Parson George Ricks." He was brought to Tuscumbia, AL as a slave at about the age of 15 in 1850. His birthdate is given as 1832. The place was just outside of Tuscumbia about 10 miles on a plantation and evidently he was treated rather favorably. He was one of the leaders of his fellow slaves. He was very fortunate to have had a good master and his wife who were very good. Even prior to freedom, men such as T. B. Larrimore came into the community to preach. He baptized the wife of his slave owner and also he brought a young preacher who was known as a boy preacher. His name was Preston Taylor. My granddad was baptized by him. He worshipped with the white families with the plantation until after freedom. It's my understanding that his master was good enough to allow him to work on Saturday evenings into the night. He saved enough money to purchase 50 acres of his master's land. I don't know if it took place after emancipation or not. There were some violations of the law that took place in regards to my great-granddad prior to emancipation – his masters taught him to read and write. He could read the Bible.

I we jump ahead of the story we find that he wrote a letter to the Gospel Advocate on one occasion and asked for help. Perhaps I should go back and say he did establish a congregation upon his freedom, primarily for his family for they had become members of the Lord's church through the efforts of Larrimore and Preston Taylor. He built the building where they worshipped. He also had learned the value of education. The one-room school was used for his family and neighboring children. The county school system gave them some assistance toward its operation. His granddaughters were educated for the purpose of teaching in that school. They were educated for other pursuits also. Nellie Mae Long, one of his granddaughters, tells how she taught there. My own mother, another of his granddaughters, taught at the school. Education must have been embued into his mind because they especially paid attention to educating his granddaughters. His daughters evidently did not have an opportunity to obtain an education. They got married. My own grandmother married Frank Hosendove. My mother was born and there were 9 other children born to them. As I discussed with my mother regarding her life, it centered around church activities and pursuing an education.

I'm told that my great granddad would preach on Sundays. He had a son that was a great song leader and I'm flattered when I am told by some who witnessed his singing that I seem to

emulate him. He ventured from his area to spread the gospel. He went down to Winfield, AL, about 65 miles south of where he was born and established a church. That church is listed in our directories as having been established in 1880, however, word of mouth tells us it was in 1876. From that church, the church 10 miles west of there is the community where I was born. That, too, is about 60 or 70 miles south of Tuscumbia. I attended a White Rock Church of Christ which was established by the Winfield church.

B: How did your folks get to White Rock?

S: My mother lived in Tuscumbia and had gone to Taledega College for two years and went back to Tuscumbia to teach for a short time. Then she went down to Jasper, AL to teach. My dad lived about 43 miles from Jasper on a farm that was originally owned by his dad and my granddad, Joe Flanigan. Joe Flanigan had homesteaded this property, 40 acres, after slavery, and then he added perhaps another acres to that. In the early 20s my mother had been in Jasper teaching and my dad would visit a sister who lived just outside of Winfield named Guin. Both of these were small communities close together, 6 or 7 miles apart. Dad had a sister who had left Guin, married and gone to Jasper where my mother was teaching. They were married. Eventually came back to Guin to stay on the farm. He brought my mother with him in order to take care of his dad. Dad stayed with the farm where the White Rock church had been established out of Winfield church. White Rock was an extra-ordinary small congregation. We had about members, a lot of children as many families had 8 or ten children. We were the exception as we had two children since I had an older brother whose name was Frank who passed away 6 years ago at 70 years old. That church provided us with the religious life, social life, the dinner on the ground experiences, the great gospel meetings with Jay Hannon coming up from Corinth, MS doing the preaching. Incidentally, Brother Hannon came from a church that my great granddad had also established. Tuscumbia is in the Muscle Shoals area, one of the tri-cities areas. I claim Tuscumbia since I had to go to there to school. Guin had not progressed to the place where it could have a school for the blacks at that time; therefore I went back to my mother's home for high school. My mother was my only teacher until I was in the 7th grade. That was in a one-room school. I don't want to interpret what has taken place, but I think it indicate how important education was drilled into Parson George's children and grandchildren. My mother was insistent that somehow I would get an education in that extremely rural area. Guin is 5 or 6 miles into the county of Marion, but I lived on the edge of Lamar County and that put us quite a ways from the county seat and activities that were taking place in the county. But there was a small community nearby in Lamar County. You could have a school provided you could gather up 10 students. With that number the county would provide you with a teacher. Our chore during the long summers – school season was not going to be more than 3 to 4 months – was to gather up students of any age. Some students were as old as 16 or 17 years in the 4th grade. My mother taught for some time at a salary of \$20 a month.

Church life was the center of all we did. [end of tape #1]